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AUTHOR	Singer, Judith; Smith, Sally
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ABSTRACT

To provide preservice teachers with opportunities for contact with people from racially and ethnically different backgrounds, one university initiated intercollegiate reader response groups using the WebCT format, which allowed students to converse with one another over distances, both within and across universities. Students from separate universities talked with one another about multicultural children's literature. This paper describes the WebCT conversations that occurred among students who read "From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun" in their reader response groups. The book depicts the relationship of a strong, self-assured black woman, who is homosexual, with her teenaged son. One group of participating students was located on an urban campus. These students were all female and predominantly black. The other group of students was located on a large suburban university. These students were predominantly white and female. In each course, students met to discuss their books during class time over 4 weeks. They also conversed online with their counterparts who were reading the same book on different campuses. Overall, students began conversations about race and sexual orientation, provoked by the novel and by their conversations with one another. They became engaged, and challenged each other to reconsider their stances regarding differences in sexual orientation and race. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Using Intercollegiate Response Groups to Help Teacher Education Students Bridge Differences of Race, Class, Ethnicity

by Judith Singer and Sally Smith

Presented at the American Educational Research Association Meeting,
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Judith Singer
Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus
One University Plaza
Brooklyn, NY 11201
jsinger@liu.edu

Sally Smith
Hofstra University 113
243 Gallon Wing
Hempstead, NY 11549
catsas@hofstra.edu

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Using Intercollegiate Response Groups to Help Teacher Education Students Bridge Differences of Race, Class, Ethnicity
by Judith Singer and Sally Smith

Introduction.

As teacher educators, we believe part of our job is to help our students and the children in their classrooms learn how to live in a diverse world. We both seek to create opportunities which allow students to reach across barriers of race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation and to begin to understand the lives of different others. We began to work together because of our shared commitment to diversity, and because we both use literature-based curriculum as a way to help students grapple with their own stances regarding recognition and affirmation of diversity.

Sally's Story.

Most of my previous teaching had been in urban schools. As a White woman, I experienced the effectiveness of collaboration with teachers of color, male teachers and gay teachers, as we planned and implemented curriculum that examined prejudice. Now as a teacher of teachers, I work with mainly White students in a suburban university. As a White teacher with White students, I feel constrained in presenting curriculum and in using literature response groups by the limited voices and perspectives I and my students encompass.

Judi's Story.

For over twenty-five years, I worked in an inner-city day care center whose population of children and staff was primarily African-American, Caribbean, and Latino. The curriculum themes of the preschool and after-school programs focused on community, diversity, and commitment to social

change. However, exposure to diversity of race was limited. Over the years, there were few White faculty besides myself, and I was the director of the program. The children in this program had few opportunities, in any part of their lives, to freely interact with peers who were white. As a teacher educator, I continue to work with a similar population of students.

While my teacher education students are more diverse than the students with whom Sally works, many of them also have few opportunities to talk and plan with classmates or teachers of other races and backgrounds. As is true in most education programs in the U. S., urban students of color and the white suburban students have little contact with those outside their cultural communities. Working together with our two different groups of students, separated by geography and background but connected through the internet, seemed like a way to bridge this gap. Our story is about this attempt, and the pitfalls and possibilities that arose from the interaction.

Theoretical Rationale.

The study that we discuss in this paper is informed by several premises which grow out of our experiences working with children and teacher education students, and which are supported in theoretical literature.

Our first premise is that using multicultural children's literature in pre- and in-service teacher education programs is invaluable for helping students talk about diversity. The lives of characters in multicultural literature may be like our own or very different. For readers of color, the importance of having ones' own experiences affirmed in books has been documented by theorists and educators (Harris, 1996; Henry, 1998, 2001; Sims-Bishop, 1997; Willis, Johnson & Nolen 1999). For both White and Black readers, the importance of multicultural literature lies in the access to other points of view, and the

experience of being the outsider to other experiences (Lewis, 1999; Beach, 1997; Singer & Smith, 2001). Using authentic multicultural literature can help insure that students' understanding goes beyond the celebration of differences to an examination of issues of diversity and inequality (Lee, Menkart & Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Sleeter, 1995).

We also find that characteristics of the text itself affect the responses of readers. Talking about books like *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, which foreground issues of race and sexual orientation, can place readers in the position of examining their own values and listening to the opinions and experiences of others, as is documented by Blake (1997) and Johnson (1997).

A further premise is that involvement in a text through private reading and public talk calls forth emotional engagement and opportunities for personal connections and rational discourse. Louise Rosenblatt described this transaction with literature as the merging of the cognitive and the affective elements of consciousness to result in a "personally-lived through" response (1980, p. 388). As we read, we become both on-lookers and participants in the story. Rabinowitz and M. Smith(1998) describe this as pretending as we read that we are invited into lives of other human beings. Others, including the authors of this paper, have found that both children and adults frequently enter into the lives of the characters, talking back and arguing with them (Athanases, 1998; Singer & Smith, 2001; Smith, 2001).

In addition, reading in the social context of reader response groups helps students focus on their own experiences and issues as well as those of different others. It can precipitate conversations about differences such as race and sexual orientation. As Richard Beach(1997) has pointed out, recognizing the limitations of one's cultural stance can lead to important critical reflection.

Initial denials of racial differences can also occur. Researchers have found a strong tendency among in-service teachers to focus on the universal commonalties of experiences rather than recognizing exclusion or institutional prejudice (Lewis, 1999; Smith & Strickland, 2001). Other participant researchers found that both middle school students and pre-service educators were able to talk about children's literature in productive and critical ways that examined difference thoughtfully (Enciso, 1994; 1998; Wolf, Ballentine & Hill, 1999). At the same time, despite efforts at acquiring multicultural understandings, both pre-service teachers and children are likely to remain separate from one another in less formal social settings, like the school yard or the lunchroom (Tatum, 1999).

We also acknowledge the limitations of reader response and literature discussion groups. Lack of exposure to different others can be limiting. Reader response groups that are homogeneous, with students from similarly homogeneous communities, can constrain response. If different voices are not present, issues of diversity may remain unexamined, or papered over, as McIntyre found in her study of White preservice teachers (1998). In a previous study of responses to multicultural literature, the authors also found evidence of distancing among White readers (Singer & Smith, 2001).

The results of this previous study have emphasized for us that meaningful contact with other groups and experiences is an important component of preparing teacher education students for diversity. Researchers and educators, among them Sleeter (1995), and Wolf, Ballentine & Hill (2000), suggest various models for out of class contact with different others. The present study documents our attempts to bridge this gap by initiating a "distance learning" project that involved two very different groups of students

in reader response and discussion via a variation of the electronic bulletin board. Other teacher educators have begun to explore the uses of the internet to deepen understanding of diversity (Merryfield, 2001). As participant observers of the process our students engaged in, we examine the effectiveness of distance learning and the problems and possibilities involved in "talking to strangers."

Intercollegiate Reader Response Groups.

In order to provide our students contact with others from racially and ethnically different backgrounds, we initiated intercollegiate reader response groups in our classrooms, using a format called WebCT. The WebCT allows participants to converse with one another over distances, both within and across universities. In our case, students from separate universities talked with one another about children's literature with multicultural themes.

To create book groups in our classes, each instructor presented the same five multicultural children's books to her students. Groups were formed based on a student's first or second choice from this selection. The novels which were offered as choices to students for their reader response groups were: *My Name is Maria Isabel* (Alma), *The Friendship* (Taylor), *Hey World, Here I Am* (Little), and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson). These books were selected because of their potential interest to readers, in both the university and the elementary school classroom, and because they provide a variety of protagonists, in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In this paper, we describe WebCT conversations which took place among those students who read *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* in their intercollegiate reader response group.

In each course, students met to discuss their books during class time over a period of four weeks. They also conversed on-line with their counterparts who were reading the same book on a different campus. The WebCT format permits conversations to remain posted indefinitely, allowing students to reply and revisit them as they choose. In addition, the format allowed the researchers to download conversations among the students. For this project, the WebCT conversations replace the response journals which typically accompany a reader response project.

The Participants and Context.

The participants in this study were two groups of teacher education students enrolled in universities with racially contrasting student bodies, one of which was predominantly Black and one mainly White. One group of students was located on an urban campus of a private university, and consisted of twenty-one graduate students, all of whom were women. Fourteen members of this group were Black (including both African American and Caribbean students), three were White, three were Latinas, and one was Asian-American. They ranged in age from early twenties to late forties. These demographics were fairly typical of the university as a whole.

Most of the students in the urban group were working full-time as classroom teachers, and most were teaching in public schools with segregated student bodies. In addition, many of these students were graduates of relatively segregated public schools themselves. The students in this group participated in the intercollegiate reader response project as part of a graduate social studies methods course. An underlying theme in the methods course was learning how to build democratic, inclusive community in elementary school classrooms, using children's literature as a major resource.

For one assignment in this course, students read and discussed a piece of multicultural children's literature in reader response groups.

A second group of students was enrolled in an undergraduate language arts methods course in a large, private, suburban university. The course, which met twice a week for three hours each session, incorporated the teaching of reading and writing methods for elementary school teachers, as well as children's literature. This group consisted of eighteen full-time junior and senior students, between the ages of twenty and twenty-one. Seventeen of the students were White, and one was Asian -American. The group also included one White male. These students were typical of others at the suburban university in that they came from working class and middle class families. Although about half of the students lived in dormitories on campus, all but two came from nearby communities. Nearby cities and towns are racially and economically homogeneous to an extreme extent. While the pre-service students had been participant-observers in schools which had Black and Latino populations, these contacts were fleeting, and did not involve on-going relationships with children and teachers.

The goals of the language arts methods class include providing a background for understanding the acquisition and development of reading and writing, including comprehension and response to literature, and the use of children's literature in the classroom to support literacy. Both to model good curriculum strategies and to give students an authentic and pleasurable reading experience, the course includes an experience with literature response groups. To introduce other voices to a rather homogenous group of students, works of multicultural literature are emphasized.

Reading multicultural children's literature can provide a sense of affirmation for Black students and others who are not accustomed to finding themselves in the books they read. For White readers, who may be more used to seeing themselves in the books they encounter in the classroom and library, multicultural children's literature introduces opportunities for vicariously experiencing the world as an outsider. Sheets (1997) characterized White teachers as "culturally disadvantaged and experientially limited," due to their mainstream experiences and assumptions. Reading multicultural literature in discussion groups can help these students make personal connections to the universal themes in these texts. Reading this literature in discussion groups also provides models for conversations about those issues often not discussed in the classroom (Hynds, 1997). By providing entry to often marginalized cultures, multicultural literature becomes a useful context for pre-service teachers to think about the experiences of children they will teach.

The Text.

We selected *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* by Jacqueline Woodson for our students to read because it is a well-reviewed, realistic young adult novel with the capacity to provoke strong feelings on the part of the reader. It is written by a Black author who depicts the relationship of a strong, self-assured Black woman, E. C., with her teenage son.

The novel introduces several issues that have relevance for educators. It is written in a diary format that enables readers to know Melanin Sun as he records his on-going reactions and thoughts about events in his life. These events include his first feelings of attraction towards a girl and his mother's revelation that her new love interest is a White woman. Melanin recounts his

thoughts and experiences about racism and White people, his homophobic reactions, and his anger at and alienation from his mother, who is his only family. Gradually, Melanin's diary portrays his grudging respect for his mother's lover and a firmer sense of himself as an African American, heterosexual male.

We expected this book to provide affirmation for Black readers with respect to the issue of race, while White readers would be placed in the unfamiliar role of outsiders. In addition, issues relating to homosexuality and interracial relationships had the potential to create conflict for both groups of readers. All four of the students in the social studies class who selected *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* were Black. All of the students in the language arts class who selected this book were White.

Pitfalls and Possibilities of the WebCT.

We hoped that participation in racially and ethnically diverse electronic discussion groups would make it possible for our students to explore ideas about race, ethnicity and sexual orientation in greater depth than they might otherwise. Initially, we experienced some obstacles. For example, some students needed more time than others to get on-line. The White and middle-class undergraduate students on the suburban campus tended to have their own computers and had already achieved more than a basic level of computer literacy. As a whole, the working-class, primarily Black students on the urban campus were less computer-savvy than their suburban counterparts. They represented a broad range of computer literacy, and many did not have computers of their own at home. While computer centers were available to students on both campuses, finding the time to make use of these resources was difficult for students who were working, some of whom were single parents.

The course instructor for the social studies course on the urban campus spent considerable time, both on the phone and in-person, coaching students about how to access the WebCT. Finally getting on line and making use of the discussion group became cause for celebration in the social studies class. Ultimately the possibilities created by getting on line could be expected to outweigh the pitfalls, except that time for this project was limited, and getting on line late meant less time to engage in a rich conversation.

A second problem we encountered was that once students were on-line, many from both groups did not seem to know what to say. The first messages were often directed at students from their own university, suggesting what we call uneasiness about "talking to strangers." At least part of this reluctance about talking to strangers was probably due to their awareness that those strangers were racially different from themselves. In the following sections, we share some of the conversations our student posted on the WebCT, as they "tiptoe around the book," become more seriously engaged with one another about a particular event in the novel, and express sharp disagreement about the role of race in this novel.

Talking to each other about food: Tiptoeing Around the Book.

In their first messages after introducing themselves, most of the readers from both groups seemed to be tiptoeing around the book. In the first passage discussed, Melanin finds himself having dinner with his mother's white female friend. Melanin doesn't understand why a White person is in his house, and he mentally finds fault with the way she eats. He says, "She didn't eat like us, taking a bite of this and a bite of that until everthing was gone. Kristen ate things separately. First the chicken, then the cornbread, now the potato salad. . . I wondered if this was a white thing." (Woodson, 1995, p. 37).

Five students responded to this scene with comments or questions regarding how people from different races eat. The first three comments quoted below are by Black students, and the next two comments are by White students:

1. Do you believe there is a difference between the way. . . ethnic groups compose food?
2. Different ethnic groups may eat the same food in different ways.
3. My cousin used to mix all his food on his plate together before eating it.
4. I think people eat differently because they grew up differently.
5. It all depends on the manners they are taught when they are young.

Although these readers convey an interest in whether there is diversity in how we eat, it does not appear that this topic provides any real challenge to ways of thinking about themselves and others. One reader, a middle-aged Black woman we have named Danielle, characterized this as an attempt to "stay clear of the real issue of the book altogether." However, after their initial hesitation, students from both groups became engaged with one another regarding their responses to how Melanin's mother, E. C., tells Melanin that she is gay.

Engagement.

Student conversations from this larger exchange show that despite the different sociocultural positions of the two groups of students and the difficulties of talking with strangers, our students did eventually engage in genuine and authentic conversations across campuses. These conversations were characterized by personal sharing, and they suggest a desire on the part of both groups of participants to identify common ground.

Initially, two of the three White, suburban students in the Melanin Sun group, Melanie and Linda, who were connected to "aol" accounts at home,

entered the conversations on WebCT with eagerness, briefly introducing themselves. They were silent during the next week, then briefly and somewhat stiffly entered into the food conversation described above. The tone of their conversations changed over the next series of interchanges, however. These interchanges depict the White students' involvement in two elements of the reader response experience:

1. Engagement and identification with a character and a situation different from themselves and their lives.

2. Engagement in authentic and thoughtful interchanges with the Black urban students.

These two groups of students revealed that their private reading of this text combined with the public talk on the WebCT stimulated emotional engagement and opportunities for personal connections and rational discourse. The conversations recorded show readers entering into the lives of the characters and talking back to them. Responding in this social context helped students focus on their own experiences and issues. With the exception of one respondent, Danielle, who has been cited above in the food conversation, it did not necessarily enable them to focus on and reconsider the issues of different others. It did precipitate conversations about differences such as race and sexual orientation, however.

Most group members from both schools reacted strongly and with deep involvement to an incident in the novel when Melanin's mother, E. C. tells him that she is gay. Students' messages reveal outrage and identification. Melanie, a White student, wrote:

> I cannot believe how E. C. told Melanin that she was gay. She just blurted it out, "I'm in love with Kristin" (p. 59) with no concern to

> his feelings. Then she expected Melanin to be OK with her lifestyle.
> He is a 14 year old boy who needs love, support and guidance.
> If my mother blurted it out like that I would have freaked out too. . .
> I am sure that he is going to be embarrassed and when his friends do
> find out they are going to give him a hard time.

Melanie alternates between close identification with the teenager, anticipating his embarrassment and understanding his freaking out, and a more mature stance of understanding that he is still a child who needs "love, support, and guidance." Another White student, Linda, also wrote that she thinks this was a bad time to tell Melanin, saying, "Melanin was trapped in the car with her. And he felt that he needed to be by himself." Her use of the word "trapped," indicates that she has gotten inside this teenager.

Danielle, a Black student, picks up on Melanie's comment about the mother, and asks, "Do you think E. C. expects too much from Mel? . . . Do you think she views her son as being mature beyond his age, able to deal with who she is?" Linda immediately replies to Danielle, continuing and expanding on her engagement with the character of Melanin. She comments on the mother-child relationship as well as the manner in which E. C. tells Melanin. She writes that she does think that E. C. expects too much:

> She sometimes forgets he's just a kid, and she treats him as a
> mature adult. I think that since it's just the two of them,
> Melanin is afraid E. C. is gong to spend all her time with Kristin."

Her thoughtful and direct reply to Danielle's query contrasts to the stiffness of the earlier food exchange.

Tara, newly entering the WebCT conversations, replies to Melanie, Danielle, and Linda. "I feel E. C. should have waited until Melanin was at least 16 years

old. At age 13 it is hard to understand that people can live different lifestyles." She discusses how his response might be more reasoned when he was older - and then considers that he might feel betrayed if she hadn't told him earlier. She concludes, "I still truly feel that E. C. should have waited a little longer. Melanin is still very young and he is slowly learning how the world turns." Melanie replies:

> EC should have been more sensitive to her son's feelings and reactions. If my mother who I am very close to told me that she was gay I would need time to think about her decision and how it would affect my life and hers.

Dora, a younger Black student, answers Melanie. "Melanie, I agree with u. I can only imagine what Mel is going though with the person in his life who was once his best friend." She continues in her next message.

> The theme of "homosexuality and race" caught my attention. As I read, I'm struck with his "abnormal home environment." Whenever my parents, who are not americanized, deviate from the "TV" world, I view them as "abnormal." But, perhaps I'm wrong and I just need to mature or learn more. Well, I believe Mel is maturing but he still has a lot more to learn.

At this point Veronica, an older Black woman, enters the conversation and responds strongly to the issue of homosexuality, saying that she agrees with Melanie:

> E. C. seemed more into Kristen and how she herself wanted her son to accept her lifestyle than she did about understanding her own son's feelings. I feel instead of her being obligated to satisfy her lover, she should have been obligated to fulfill her son's emptiness and distant

> feeling between them both. You should always take care of home first before you take care of outsiders.

These students share values and feelings stimulated by the actions of the characters, as they discuss the issues in the novel. A little later, Danielle, the middle-aged Black student, re-enters this intense conversation, and refers to an earlier message she had posted, when she was watching a TV program in which children with gay parents were being interviewed. She raises a question for these respondents to consider:

> There are gay parents and children living their lives everyday in every way. What should we do as teachers to support all of our students who may be experiencing community and family life in many different ways?

Linda, a White student, responds directly to Danielle's question, moving away from the immediate involvement in the plight of Melanin and his mother that characterized previous responses:

> I think it is important for teachers to discuss homosexuality in the classroom. When they discuss families they should discuss all kinds of families. This should include blended families and families with parents that are gay or lesbian. If it's not discussed these children will think their families aren't normal. Also if a child is confused about their own sexuality, discussing this topic could prevent them from feeling strange and alone.

In this response, Linda moves from engagement with the goings-on in the novel, and takes the more reflective stance of the teacher, recognizing the need to make children feel comfortable about their families, and also stating

the need for young children to feel at ease about their own sexuality. In these interchanges, students from both schools move from engagement in a crucial and emotional aspect of the novel to a more reflective stance. Both of these students engage one another in questions and reflection.

Getting Caught Up.

The above conversations demonstrate that racially different students from different campuses do become engaged in significant conversations with one another when they discuss how this book addresses E. C.'s revelation of her homosexuality. At the same time, issues relating to race and racial discrimination are also strongly represented in this book, but most students in this literature group pay them no attention. There is one significant exception to this.

Two students, Veronica, a Black urban student, and Tara, a White suburban student, become engaged in a somewhat tense conversation about race. We will first describe these two very different students, and then we will present their interchange.

Veronica.

Veronica is a working class African American woman in her mid- to late forties, struggling to make a career for herself as a teacher, while also trying to come to terms with a teenage daughter who has a child of her own and has declared herself to be gay. Veronica is slender, of medium height, with medium brown skin. Her hair is reddish-brown, and she sometimes wears it straightened, with bangs brushing her eyebrows, and sometimes wrapped in a colorful African-style head wrap. She often wears a determined look on her face.

Veronica lives in a low-income, high crime area on the outskirts of a large city. The urban University she attends is one block away from the subway to her home. Veronica is one of the students who took several tries before she could get on- line, and whom we all applauded vociferously when she finally achieved that status. While so many students have moved into the computer age, Veronica has limited access to a computer off-campus, and she is often without even phone service when the phone company declares her number to be "temporarily disconnected." On a couple of occasions when I tried to phone Veronica, I had to reach her by calling a neighbor who sent a child to knock on Veronica's door. Veronica's life is lived at some distance from those lived by her White counterparts at the suburban university.

Tara.

Tara is White, a tall young woman with long, flyaway brown hair and blue eyes, always casually but appropriately dressed. She is from a working class background and mentioned in class discussions and in the WebCT conversations that she had been raised by her mother, a single parent. She was a risk taker in class, who would admit what she didn't know, and jump into class conversations, in contrast to the careful, protective responses of other students in the class. She would ask genuine questions designed to find out more information - just this side of ingenuous. She immediately selected this novel from others, and talked enthusiastically with me and her fellow group members during class literature discussion groups about the plot and the issues in the book. Her energy and open, positive attitude made her a well liked classmate and participant observer in a second grade class.

These are two women whose paths were not likely to cross outside of the Intercollegiate Reader Response Group we created for them. Tara begins the conversation.

> I have to say that I am so glad that I chose this book. I feel that in some ways Melanin's life is like my own. I have lived with my mother my whole life. If I were 13 and my mother broke that kind of news to me I would react the same way Melanin did. E.C. means the world to Melanin. He feels that she deserves the best. . . At age 13 opinions are formed without really any knowledge. Melanin has not even experienced life yet. He can't even get up the nerve to call Angie! What does that say about his mentality at this point? If he cannot handle calling a girl, how can he handle the news of his own mother being gay?. . . Melanin feels as though he is the only one and nobody else matters. White people mean nothing to him because he has never had any true experiences with them. Wow, I think I am getting caught up here. I guess you can see that I have some opinions about this book. I will stop for now. Bye!

Veronica responds:

> In response to the message posted by Tara on Sunday, March 11th I agree that E. C. should have waited until Melanin was older before she told him of her gay relationship. Also in response to something else you had mentioned about how Melanin felt white people meant nothing to him and then you chose to say for him, he feels that way because he never had any true experiences with them. I cannot agree with you there because I feel you sounded a little hostile when you made that statement and to me you seemed to have took it personal instead of reading between the lines. If you can recall, it stated in the book how Melanin spoke about

the pain blacks went through and after a while the pain went away but, there was always anger that came to the surface whenever something brought it alive. Even though he personally never had any experiences with white people, he still knew about the pain. I think he means nothing mattered because he felt he was alone, and losing his mother to a white woman made him think about that anger. When you said you were getting caught up here and that we can see you have some opinions about this book, I am sure we all have opinions and unless we can all talk about those opinions instead of being angry and caught up by other people's statements none of us will be solving the problem of racism.

Tara responds:

This is a message for Veronica. When I had posted the message on March 11th, I have to say that I was not very far into the book. I was simply expressing my opinions on what I felt was happening in the story. I do not understand how you sensed hostility because that was not my intention when I posted that message. I actually thought the tone I presented was cheerful. I am actually quite impressed with the book now that I have finished reading it. In reference to the statement I made, "white people mean nothing to him because he has never had any true experiences with them," that was clearly the case in the beginning of the story. On page 2: "I don't have a lot of reason to spend time with white people -- they don't live around here or go to my school. I mean, I have white teachers but they're teachers, so they don't really count." At that point in the book, white people meant nothing to him. Even his own teachers who were white didn't count. For Melanin, it was almost like out of sight, out of mind - at that point in the story. I am sorry if you felt I

was angry. I was certainly not. Now that I have finished the story, I can analyze that book a bit better. Have you finished reading it? In my mind, Melanin can overcome anything. He broke down a barrier of hate. He had so much hatred towards something he had never experienced. He had never experienced a white woman in his home who was in love with his only mother. All he needed was some true experiences, some real experience with what he supposedly had all this hate for. In the beginning of the story Melanin had opinions of people without basing it on any knowledge. He had never had any experiences with gay people. And now, his mother is in love with a woman who is gay and white. This is the exact type of person Melanin had no experience with, but right away he formed his opinions about Kristen. He didn't even want to get to know her. But in the end, he let himself have an experience with her. That is why inside of him he felt the small closed up space for Kristen begin to open up and fill itself. He finally had something to base his opinion on. He had his true experience. That was all it took for him to realize that it's not so bad after all. He was finally beginning to see the other side. Well, I have said a lot so I will go for now. Feel free to reply. Bye!

Veronica does not replay to this message. In this exchange, Veronica, a middle-aged Black woman, is asking Tara, a young White woman, to understand that the interactions which Black people have with White people often call up a reservoir of pain built on a lifetime of discrimination. In Veronica's view, when Tara says Melanin has not had any "true" experiences with White people, she is denying Melanin's experiences with discrimination. Urging Tara to "read between the lines," Veronica may be the one taking personally

the fact that her own true experiences of discrimination are being denied by Tara as well.

Tara, on her part, seems to argue that Melanin has had only bad experiences with White people earlier in the book. In Tara's view, a "true" experience with a White person would be a good experience, and she supports this perspective by citing the "good" experience Melanin has with Kristin, E.C.'s White lover, at the end of the book.

We seem to have a stand-off here. Tara does not acknowledge the pain that accompanies being Black in the United States, while Veronica needs this pain, which is also her pain, to be acknowledged, or "none of us will be solving the problem of racism." At the same time, it is important to Tara, as a White woman, to establish that it is possible for a Black person to have a good relationship to a White person. Both women draw on the novel to support their claims about good and bad experiences. However, Veronica's frame of reference is broader than the book, including the scope of her own life, while Tara seems to remain located in the novel and in her own lack of "true" experiences and historical knowledge.

Conclusion.

Further exploration of this medium to help students make connections with different others is definitely warranted, and we plan to continue to use the WebCT for this purpose in our classrooms. While we cannot claim that students increased their appreciation of one another as a result of reading this novel together, there were beginning conversations about race and sexual orientation, provoked by the novel and by their conversations with one another. Students did become engaged, and they did challenge one another to reconsider their stances regarding differences of sexual orientation and of

race. The conversations between Tara and Veronica, and the engagement of students in discussion of E. C.'s announcement of her sexuality, illustrate both the potential for this type of exchange and the limitations of the process.

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Sally Smith, ASST Prof. (over)
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